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THE APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE

“He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies.” The truths involved in this dictum of Emerson’s appear sufficiently obvious in connection with most of man’s mental activities. We recognize that the chemist must carry a considerable cargo of knowledge about metals and salts and reagents before he can bring any great amount of valuable information out of his laboratory; and so with the astronomer, the biologist, the physician, the man of commerce. It is only in the sphere of literature that we fail to realize the need of bringing knowledge to the book as an inevitable preparative for carrying knowledge from the book. We voyage with empty bottoms to the Realms of Gold, and then wonder why we fail to return with ingot-laden holds.

We appreciate a poem as we see in it a representation, or interpretation, of life, of our own life,—of our intellectual, sensuous, and emotional experience; we fail to appreciate as the poem offers a representation, or interpretation, of intellectual, sensuous, or emotional states which lie outside our experience. This thesis does not mean that to be appreciated, the poem must be a transcript of our own life, nor yet merely that experience brings with it a deeper and broader mental and spiritual being. It means something less than the former and more than the latter. That we may really appreciate and enjoy a work of literary art, this work must present a situation or emotion capable of reproducing in us a mental or spiritual state which we have already known. The poem becomes a mirror wherein we see reflected our own life, not indeed in its details—most of these, spiritually, may be accidental—but in its essence. Thus we have formed objectively a sort of spiritual memory image.

In this connection we recall Matthew Arnold’s defining of poetry as a criticism of life, yet Arnold would repudiate any such interpretation of his definition as I have put forth; in fact, he has done so: “A poet or poem,” he says, “may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances have great power to sway our estimate of this or

that poet's work. And thus we get the source of a fallacy in our poetic judgments—the fallacy caused by an estimate which we may call personal."

We may agree with Arnold that this personal basis of judgment leads to error in absolute appraisement, and yet urge that it forms the truest touchstone of our personal appreciation,—of what the poem is really worth to us.

The whole force of this principle lies in its application, and this application each one can probably best make for himself. In a limited space, however, it can be applied in a few illustrations which may be at least suggestive and which may give it a greater clearness and significance.

For purposes of this discussion we may recognize four classes of literary elements and, for convenience' sake, may term them, first, the purely intellectual element; second, the presentively sensuous element; third, the representively sensuous element; and, fourth, the representively emotional or spiritual element.

The most obvious of these sources of literary appreciation, the purely intellectual, is found in the satisfying of mere intellectual curiosity, the desire for novelty and excitement. This forms the basis of most narrative, particularly of most fiction. If this element be somewhat refined, it becomes a sense of intellectual surprise, finding its cause either in the situation portrayed, in the idea presented, or in mere verbal expression. Out of the surprise of situation, especially where the quality of incongruity exists, arises what is popularly called Humor; and out of the surprise of idea or of verbal expression, arises Wit. The demand for appreciation is here mainly, almost exclusively, an intellectual one. At the lowest it requires intellectual clarity, and at its highest no more than intellectual subtlety.

There is in this connection a wide range and diversity of appreciation. Of the thousands who daily laugh over Goldberg's cartoons, not one, possibly, would find the smallest interest in *Don Quixote*; and while it requires small effort to enjoy the absurdities of "Mr. Dooley" or George Ade, the merely intelligent reading of *Tristram Shandy* or the *Autocrat* presupposes no small degree of intellectual culture. Still this diversity is almost

entirely on mental grounds, and experience plays here a very small part.

Turning next to the presentively sensuous element in literature, we find a range of appreciation equally wide. By the term, presentively sensuous element, are meant those qualities of the literary work which make a direct appeal to the senses of the reader, irrespective of any thought conveyed or any feeling suggested. In prose this manifests itself principally in the form of expression, its symmetry and harmony. In poetry there is the added charm of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and the melody dependent on consonant and vowel tone values. A stereotyped example of this element is found in Poe's *The Bells* and Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. This beauty, however, is more telling when it is produced more subtly, as when Tennyson weaves the magic spell of his little moon-tipped lullaby or Rossetti makes into a strain of rare music the mere enumeration of Mary's hand-maidens,—

“ Whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret, and Rosalys.”

Appreciation of the purely sensuous side of poetic art is of like nature with that of every other art form. It is a growth. The fact that a man can enjoy a sketch of Gibson's does not imply that he can find pleasure in a Botticelli madonna; and a delight in the latest piece of rag-time, come from the Winter Garden all hot, does not suggest even a remote interest in a Beethoven sonata. This growth, in the pictorial and musical arts, is secured partly through the study of abstract principle, but mainly through long-continued contact with the embodiment of the principle. It is in like manner that we grow from an appreciation of such obvious melody as that of Kipling's *Mandalay* or Alfred Noyes's *Forty Singing Seamen* to a joy in the “plaintive anthem” of Keats's nightingale and the “lisp of leaves and ripple of rain” which fill shadows and windy places of Swinburne.

While there is this strong dependence of appreciation upon growth, still here again growth is largely independent of experience. The æsthetic faculties, like the intellect, may be expanded without any real enlarging of the spiritual man. Per-

fection of literary form may be attained by a writer as passionless as Pope, and demands just as little of warm humanity for the purposes of appreciation on the part of the reader.

Although this presentively sensuous element in literature has been spoken of as if it were a thing apart from the thought and spirit, we realize that it is of the very essence of literature, and can no more be dissociated from the substance than the human body can be divorced from the mind and soul. It is that robe of "intertissued pearl and gold" that we shall always require for our noblest thoughts: the loftier the thought, the more imperative the demand for a superiority of diction marking its style and manner.

A different condition arises when we turn to consider the representively sensuous element in literature. By this term may be understood the production or revival in the mind of the reader of a sense impression, conveyed through the agency of a literary work. Here the function of the artist is twofold. First of all, he teaches us to see. He opens bit by bit the sluice-gates that the flood of beauty may gradually find a passage into our lives. In this, the work of the artist is slow and tedious, and his power limited. He is trying to aid us in gathering together a store of sense impressions, which he can afterwards readjust and fill with life. In this last clause appears his second function, wherein he plays the part of the master stage-manager. With memory acting as his stage-carpenter and scene-shifter, he drags forth the stored up properties, touches them with his magic wand, and transforms them into Forests of Arden or flowery meads of Bohemia or moon-steeped midsummer woods and plains of Attica. Nor is this all. He plays the alchemist and discovers the philosopher's stone. At his touch our six gray mice suddenly become prancing stallions, and our homely yellow pumpkin is changed into a coach all golden. Yet even Cinderella's fairy god-mother requires that first there be the six gray mice and the yellow pumpkin.

The boldest flight of fancy on the part of the writer is no more than a reassembling and rearranging of impressions acquired first through experience. The same truth controls the response of the reader. No word-picture, however vivid, can create in

the mind of the reader an image other than nebulous and impotent unless there is already present, acquired through experience, materials which the wand of the enchanter can readjust, fill with new life, and interpret. The sea poetry of Arnold and Tennyson must remain largely meaningless to one who has not also seen "the wild white horses foam and fret," or heard the league-long roller "climb and fall and roar rock-thwarted under bellowing caves, beneath the windy wall." No one can have any real understanding of Coleridge's Mont Blanc or Wordsworth's Snowdon unless he too has stood before some lofty peak, "companion of the morning star at dawn, and of the dawn co-herald," and felt its awful height "utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise."

Here again, moreover, appears the principle of growth in appreciation. One may enjoy Tom Moore's rather glaring Oriental settings, or even the equally brilliant but more complex canvases of Ruskin, yet be indifferent to the beauty where the picture is more subtly presented. Closely associated with this fact is the gradation of subtlety on the part of the writer, as he seeks less and less for a direct presentment of detail and relies more and more on suggestion. The picture may be as carefully wrought a study as that exquisite miniature which Browning calls "A Face,"—

"Painted upon a background of pale gold,
Such as the early Tuscan art prefers.

Or the writer may rely more upon his reader's imagination and secure his effect with a few bold strokes, as does Tennyson in the tapestries wherewith he has draped the walls of his *Palace of Art*. The picture becomes most effective, however, when it is conveyed with a minimum of detail and an almost entire relying upon imagination,—provided, of course, the reader can respond to the demand on his imagination. A striking illustration of this quality appears in William Morris's picture of Guinevere facing her accusers,—the damp hair swept carelessly back from the white brow, eye and cheek aflame, the whole form eagerly intent, yet about the thin lip a hovering smile of scorn and the regal head proudly unbowed—all woman and all queen:—

"But knowing now that they would have her speak,
 She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
 Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,
 As though she had had there a shameful blow.
 And feeling it shameful to feel aught but shame
 All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so
 She must a little touch it."

The writer may even get his effect by a single stroke of his brush, as Henley in his *Margaritæ Sorori*:—

"The Sun
 Closing his benediction
 Sinks, and the darkening air
 Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night—
 Night with her train of stars
 And her great gift of sleep."

*Night with her train of stars
 And her great gift of sleep.*

In these two lines are all the mystery and splendor of night,—the unmeasured and measureless vastness and peace, the far silent stars—and the great gift of sleep.

Perhaps the most notable example in English letters of conveying a sense-impression through sheer suggestion is Browning's familiar description of the song of the thrush; and well known as it is, it is hard to forbear quoting it in part:—

"And after April, when May follows,
 And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!
 Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
 Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
 Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge,—

Here the poet pauses to listen; and if you have ever heard the melody of the thrush, a silver flute-note sounds in your ear as it does in his. Then, as the music dies away across the fields rough with hoary dew, he takes up again his own silver song,—

"That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over
 Lest you should think he never could recapture
 The first fine careless rapture!"

Not, however, until we come to consider the representively emotional and spiritual element in literature, do we find the most impressive application of the principle, that our appreciation is dependent upon and proportional to our personal experience.

Before there can be any genuine response to the stimulus of the poet's we must have realized in our own life the sentiment of joy or sorrow which we see there portrayed; and this response is proportional to the depth and extent of our emotional and spiritual being.

It may be true that beauty is its own excuse for being; that the work of poetic art has the same justification as the full-blown rose, the breaking wave, the stars of the summer midnight, or the Winged Victory, the Sistine Madonna, the Ninth Symphony. Yet this view merely tests its absolute worth, and not its worth to you and to me.

Now, as a matter of fact, the emotional range of a large part of mankind is extremely limited. Most lives run in a channel without great breadth or depth; constitutionally or because of the setting of their lives, most men feel only the more primitive and commonplace sentiments. Hence it is that poems conveying these simpler emotions, like those of Longfellow and Burns, make the widest appeal. As the emotion becomes loftier or more complex, there is a proportional decrease of readers, or appreciators. Most readers react to the conventional piety of Whittier's *The Eternal Goodness*, the mild melancholy of the *Elegy*, or the virile hardihood of *Horatius*, yet find very unreal the ecstasy of Shelley's *Skylark*, the longing and disappointment of the *Ode to the West Wind*, or the militant faith of *Saul*. This is only saying that man appreciates the poem as he finds in it a reflection and interpretation of life—of his own life.

Hence, too, it is that a poem which at one period of our life we read with indifference may become afterwards an enduring source of literary enjoyment. It is only after some great purifying force—either a great happiness or a great grief—has come into our life, leaving it sweet and cleansed of every stain, that we can understand the exquisite purity of Pippa's dew-drenched morning song. To know the meaning of *Andrea del Sarto*, we must have sat, as he, at twilight, looking a half-hour forth on Fiesole, when youth and hope and art are all toned down, and a common grayness silvers everything. There come into the lives of us all, moments when the reservoirs of being seem utterly drained of their living waters; when the dull mist closes in upon

us from all sides, blinding the sight, deadening the will, chilling the heart. Then it is that a little poem which we may have read with indifference a score of times, becomes for us pregnant with all meaning,—Rossetti's simple stanzas to *The Woodspurge*.

Tennyson has given us an excellent illustration of this truth in his *Elaine*. The great Lancelot has ridden into the simple world of the Lily Maid; he has been her knight and has suffered for her sake; she has known the supreme giving of a perfect love and a perfect service; and now he has ridden away, and the sunlight has faded from her sky.

“So in her tower alone the maiden sat:
His very shield was gone; only the case,
Her own poor work, her empty labour, left.
But still she heard him, still his picture formed
And grew between her and the pictured wall.
Then came her father, saying in low tones,
'Have comfort,' whom she greeted quietly.
Then came her brethren saying, 'Peace to thee,
Sweet sister,' whom she answered with all calm.
But when they left her to herself again,
Death, like a friend's voice from a distant field
Approaching through the darkness, called; the owls
Wailing had power upon her, and she mixt
Her fancies with the sallow-rifted glooms
Of evening, and the moanings of the wind.”

As perfect as is the whole passage, the master-touch lies in two lines:—

“His very shield was gone; only the case,
Her own poor work, her empty labour, left.”

Who that has come back to the empty chamber which held a presence it shall hold no more, and sees here and there the little objects which knew the daily touch of the hand now vanished, but knows the fullness of Elaine's desolation?

There are, however, two facts that apparently refuse to adjust themselves to the principle herein enunciated. How, in the first case, shall we account for the frequent appreciation among youth of the more somber types of literature, portraying phases of experience that cannot have been encountered in their own lives; and, in the second place, how shall we account for the appreciation at all of the great masterpieces—the *Antigones*, the

Fausts, the Hamlets—where the spiritual struggle is outside the experience of even the greatest of us?

A psychological truth may lead us to an explanation of the first difficulty. The period of adolescence is one of peculiarly vivid sense-impression; at no other time of life is man so sensuously aware of the world around him,—the blue depth of heaven's vault, the piercing fragrance and beauty of the flowers, the fantastic arabesques of the wind-wrought leaf-shadows, the golden dust of the sunset. But the heavens are scarred with tempest; the flower fades; the naked tree shivers in the blast of winter; the sunset glory pales into the gray of evening. With sensitive youth this eternal flux of things translates itself, consciously or subconsciously, into a poignant symbol of the futility of all life—"We are such stuff as dreams are made on." This attitude is not necessarily a morbid one; it may be rather a testimony of hale and abundant vitality. The more vivid the perception, the more violent the reaction. Thoughtful, sensitive youth are the most sincere of pessimists and the truest disciples, not indeed of the leaden paragraphs of Schopenhauer, but of the rose-tinted stanzas of the *Rubaiyat*. There has, in truth, not yet come into their lives that meliorism which grows out of real sorrow. It is at twilight that the world is narrowest and bleakest; when the night has come, the universe grows once more ample and free. And then, too, the great stars appear.

It would be easy to meet the second difficulty, regarding our appreciation of the world's greatest work, with the answer that there is no general appreciation of these "captain jewels of the carcanet." It is more to the point, however, to call attention to a significant fact: the parts of these poems which are generally known are just those which express an experience generally understood. The one well-known passage of *Antigone* is the chorus of the Theban Elders apostrophizing love. The fragment of the *Divine Comedy* which is common property is the tangled web of love and sin and jealousy wherein Francesca, Paolo, and Lanciotto struggle and perish. The Ophelia thread in *Hamlet* is to most minds the major motif of the play. The most striking illustration of this truth, however, is found in connection with Goethe's master-work. To most people the whole of *Faust* is

summed up in the Marguerite episode, an episode that is essentially little more than an incident in the profound soul-drama—with its “armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk”—of which the protagonist is the centre.

The general familiarity with these minor elements of their respective works is not solely, nor chiefly, due to their having been given currency as isolated ideas. On the contrary, they were isolated and became current because they represented a phase of life which, at least in some degree, the major part of mankind has known and felt.

There still remains, however, a residuum of readers who refuse to be reduced by so simple a process, and to whom Orestes and Electra, Œdipus and Iphigenia, Lear and Desdemona, are living light-fountains of eternal truth and beauty. These creations have a being apart from the narrow setting in which they are placed by Æschylus and Sophocles and Shakespeare; they palpitate with an unending and endless life. It remains, then, to account for this fact.

These great literary masterpieces are the embodiment of those elemental emotions which are the basis of our spiritual being. One does not have to know the story of Iphigenia and Othello to know the emotion of pity for innocence suffering or of stern indignation against treachery and betrayal. Then, too, there thrills through these great treasures of the past that elemental terror of an unseen destiny,—that arch-fear of death and death-in-life,—which freezes alike the heart-blood of the man in the modern city and of the savage in the primeval forest. Now it is the voice of the Celtic House of Usna, shrilling through the Druid-haunted oak-forests, “Deirdre is dead, Deirdre the Beautiful!” Now it is the bitter cry of once proud Œdipus, blind and “groping his way to hide the dwindling remnant of his life in Hades dark,” with Jocasta,—queen and wife and mother, and, beyond, the wailing of the Chorus. Now it is the fierce raving of Lear, with a universe crashing about his old gray head, as if to prove that all kingship were merely “a crown left in the desert to become the spoil of the adder and the pillow of wandering dust.” And so, through much of madness and more of sin, we follow the Theban dynasty and Pelops’ line; we wander through

the haunted courts of the House of Malatesta, and the House of Macbeth, and the House of Ravenswood; until we come to the latest sister of these children of Destiny,—poor, bewildered Tess of the House of the D'Urbervilles, struggling blindly to her doom in that labyrinth whose only exit is the trap-door of the scaffold. Yet these emotions exist outside the poem and in our own souls; and the poem is only "a fowler snaring them in a net."

These emotions are elemental as a musical phrase is elemental. As our life is broadened and deepened by experience, the phrase is amplified and glorified into the symphony, until that which could once have been played upon a single flute now demands the entire range of the orchestra. There is in every great literary work a godlike plenitude, and to whoever asks shall be given—but only as he is able to receive. As Walter Raleigh has phrased the truth: "We receive but what we give, and take away only what we are fit to carry."

One great truth follows from the principles above adduced,—that of the permanency of great literature. There will come whole eras when, as at the present time, literature will suffer a long neglect. The age will find its interests mainly in material activities; its emotional and spiritual life will become shallow and dormant; it will seek from books no more than recreation and relief from mental exertion. But the spiritual will eventually reassert itself. Then will literature return once more to its true currency and supremacy; for it is the supreme conservator and interpreter of life, the mirror wherein man sees the reflection of his own soul.

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